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THE TWENTY-FOUR MONTH COMMAND TOUR:  
IS IT THE OPTIMUM LENGTH?

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BY

COLONEL PREAS L. STREET, SC

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## ABSTRACT

The Army established the twenty-four month command tour in late 1983. It has served us well since then, but is it the optimum? Should the Army return to shorter command tours strictly as a means of allowing more officers the opportunity to command? Should the command tour length be longer to provide more stability to the unit? What other factors and variables should policy makers consider in determining the optimum command tour length:

This study reviews the basis for the 1983 CSA decision established the minimum command tour at twenty-four months. It also discusses, at length, the variables senior leaders must consider in determining the best length for command tours. The study also provides a summary of the opinions of former commanders attending the USAWC in the class of 1990. This effort focuses on those command tours at the Lieutenant Colonel level which are now twenty-four month tours. It does not analyze special cases not falling into the twenty-four month category, and the Product Manager tours. However, the author feels that much of the data, the discussion, and the conclusions apply to those commands. Also, though the study does not specifically address Colonel level commands, the material is very relevant to them as well.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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THE TWENTY-FOUR MONTH COMMAND TOUR:  
IS IT THE OPTIMUM LENGTH?

An Individual Study Project  
Intended for Publication

by

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## ABSTRACT


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The Army established the twenty-four month command tour in late 1983. It has served us well since then, but is it the optimum? Should the Army return to shorter command tours strictly as a means of allowing more officers the opportunity to command? Should the command tour length be longer to provide more stability to the unit? What other factors and variables should policy makers consider in determining the optimum command tour length?

This study reviews the basis for the 1983 CSA decision establishing the minimum command tour at twenty-four months. It also discusses, at length, the variables senior leaders must consider in determining the best length for command tours. The study also provides a summary of the opinions of former commanders attending the USAWC in the class of 1990. This effort focuses on those command tours at the Lieutenant Colonel level which are now twenty-four month tours. It does not analyze special cases not falling into the twenty-four month category, such as Engineer District commands, commands in short tour areas, and Product Manager tours. However, the author feels that much of the data, the discussion, and the conclusions apply to those commands. Also, though the study does not specifically address Colonel level commands, the material is very relevant to them as well. (CP) 

## Introduction

In July 1983 General John A. Wickham, Jr., Army Chief of Staff (CSA), approved the twenty-four month command tour length policy for Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel level commands. The policy set the tour length for battalion and brigade level command at a minimum of twenty-four months. It gave commanders in the grade of Major General and above the authority to extend the command tour by a maximum of six months. This provided some flexibility in meeting the needs of the major command. That policy remains in effect today as stated in Army Regulation (AR) 600-20 and as shown in Figure 1.

Before this decision, the standard command tour length for battalion and brigade level commands had varied greatly. The length had been as short as six months (the policy for most field grade commanders in Vietnam at the height of the conflict) and as long as thirty months (the policy approved in 1980).<sup>1</sup>

This paper reviews the basis of the decision establishing the twenty-four month command tour length policy. It discusses how the policy applied to the Centralized Command Selection System (CCSS) process since the Fiscal Year 85 selection board. It offers an opinion as to the validity of those reasons today and in the future. It provides an analysis of the feedback received from former commanders, now students in the U.S. Army War College class of 1990, concerning their opinions on command tour length. Finally, it provides conclusions and

recommendations concerning the Army's command tour length policy. For the purposes of this paper, I focus my discussion on commands at the Lieutenant Colonel level and only on those that are twenty-four month commands. I do this for two reasons. First, most of the commands in this category are for Lieutenant Colonels. Second, most of the command specific data available to me deals with this group. However, my discussions and my conclusions apply to Colonel level commands of the same length. I do not discuss three year commands of engineer districts, Project Manager tours, TRADOC Systems Manager tours, etc. as they are governed by separate policies. Also, I do not cover the uniqueness of Lieutenant Colonel command in short tour overseas areas.

#### **Basis of Current Policy**

In early June 1983 the CSA directed the Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) to analyze the Army's policy on command tour length and to recommend any appropriate changes. DCSPER completed the analysis in July 1983 and provided the results and the recommendations to the CSA in an Action Memorandum.<sup>2</sup>

The memorandum included discussions on several key issues. First, it analyzed the impact of increased command tour length on the opportunity to command. It also discussed Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel retention rates as they relate to decreased command opportunity. The memorandum also included the views of several Major Army Command (MACOM) commanders on the subject of command tour length.

The DCSPER analysis determined that the average length of command tours increased from 25.3 months in FY81 to 30.5 months in FY83. This was the result of the 1980 policy setting command tour length at thirty months. The increase had reduced command opportunity by five percent for Colonels and by four percent for Lieutenant Colonels.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning retention, the analysis determined that at the time of the 1980 policy decision, senior officials thought officer retention (Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel) would decline. They believed that more officers would leave the Army as a result of the reduced opportunity to command. This may have been a valid assumption had all other factors remained constant. However, such factors as the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA), pay increases, and a rising unemployment rate in the civilian sector apparently offset the impact of diminished chances to command. Consequently, retention actually increased by approximately seven percent for Colonels and eight percent for Lieutenant Colonels.<sup>4</sup>

In querying the MACOM commanders in the field, the DCSPER found that the commanders of Forces Command (FORSCOM), Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), and U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) all favored a twenty-four month command tour. Additionally, all preferred to have some flexibility at the MACOM commander level to adjust the tour length to best fit the needs of the command.

Before continuing with the discussion of the DCSPER analysis, I think there is an additional point that is worthy of mentioning here. My research indicates that at the time he



directed the DCSPER to do the analysis the CSA may have been considering changing the then current policy of a thirty month command tour to one of thirty-six months. Information shows that the CSA was concerned about an Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) issue. Briefing slides address a question centered around a thirty-six month command tour length policy. Specifically, would those officers not selected for command seek additional assignments in their other OPMS specialty if shown that they could be promoted to Colonel without having a command.<sup>5</sup> Though there is no date on the briefing, it appears to be from the same time frame (June/July 1983). The briefing compares the then current command tour length policy of thirty months with twenty-four and thirty-six month tours. It analyzes the impact of these two alternatives on promotion to Colonel and selection to attend Senior Service College (SSC). Figure 2 shows the overall conclusions of this effort.

I now return to the DCSPER memorandum. The DCSPER paper ends with a discussion of the subjective evaluation of command tour length and of how important the command experience is in professional development.

In view of the discussion on the above points, the DCSPER recommended a change in policy that would reduce the thirty month command tour to twenty-four months. He further recommended giving the authority to major commanders to extend tours by up to six months.

I believe the points discussed in the DCSPER memorandum were sufficiently sound to gain the CSA decision that gave us our

current policy of a command tour of a minimum of twenty-four months. The briefing to which I referred earlier, which addressed more than just command tour length, also supported the twenty-four month command tour recommendation. This was done by addressing two important factors of officer personnel management: promotion and Senior Service College selection. The key point made in the briefing, however, was that the Army should not base a command tour length decision solely on issues dealing with the success or failure of OPMS. In other words, the briefing emphasized that we must look at OPMS issues as separate and distinct items.<sup>6</sup>

HQDA announced the new twenty-four month command tour length in July 1983. In the message announcing the change some of the supporting rationale included, "to optimize cohesion and stability in command and opportunity for professional development in command."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, from the analysis completed by the DCSPER, the DCSPER action memorandum containing both DCSPER and MACOM commander input, and the supporting conclusions of the "OPMS question" briefing, the decision for the twenty-four month command tour was made.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Defining the Optimum Command Tour Length**

What is an "optimum" command tour length? What are we trying to optimize? Before trying to determine if the current command tour length is the best, I need to define the term as I approached it.

I paraphrase Webster to define optimum as the most favorable end or the best possible result under all given conditions. I outline the conditions I identified to which we must seek the best result (optimum command tour length) below.

On reviewing the main points of the DCSPER memorandum and the briefing I referred to above, I conclude that the primary basis on which the CSA made his decision was his desire to establish a fixed command tour length that accomplished two tasks. He wanted a command tour length that 1) optimized unit stability and 2) allowed the maximum number of officers the opportunity to command. Undoubtedly, he considered other variables in deciding on the two year tour. For example, items such as having a manageable system, supporting the desire for former battalion commanders to serve in certain jobs, minimizing commander stress and burnout, and facilitating the promotion and school selection processes are also important. My research into the basis of the decision itself found little specific reference to these items. However, these considerations are still important and I will discuss some of them in more detail later. First, I will elaborate on the two primary considerations--unit stability and opportunity to command.

In his memorandum to the CSA, the DCSPER specifically referenced the positive aspects of the stability provided by longer command tour lengths. He pointed this out to the CSA saying, "We must not take stability off our top line of considerations."<sup>9</sup> However, he went on to imply that the increasing stability given by longer tours may reach a point of

diminishing return. According to the DCSPER, one could only determine this effect by a subjective evaluation based on the value one placed on the command experience. Just how important, then, is unit stability?

I define unit stability, in the context of command tour length, as minimizing the overall turbulence in the organization. I am not talking about personnel turbulence (turnover) alone. I am referring to turbulence from the standpoint of the unit's ability to perform as a cohesive body. In discussing it in this context, most people agree that unit stability has to be a top priority when setting command tour length policy. However, agreeing on exactly how important it is may be more difficult. For example, in its final report in 1978, the study group for the Review of Education and Training for Officers (RETO) study stated (in discussing shorter command tour lengths), "Perhaps the worst impact of a short term command policy is on the enlisted soldier. At the very time we move toward more stability for individual troops, we perpetuate revolving door command." The report went on to say, "In a sense, there is no such thing as a small change in local policy for the private. The most he can hope for is a small reduction in the frequency with which chaotic disorder is introduced."<sup>10</sup>

I believe there are two sides to the stability coin. First, there is the short side. The more frequently the commander changes, the more the turbulence in the organization. This is the side of the coin which most often surfaces when people discuss unit stability. This is because new commanders have a

propensity to make changes in unit processes. In the long run they may not change the end result, but they change the means of getting there. These changes cause turbulence in the unit--from both the individual soldier's and the whole unit's viewpoint. New commanders make these changes for many reasons. Probably the most common one, though, is for the commander to let members of the unit know he is "on board" and that he "is now the commander." Though maybe seen as small changes to the new commander, it is these actions that introduce the chaotic disorder referred to by the RETO study. One could conclude then, that shorter command tours perpetuate this kind of instability as commanders change more frequently and new commanders see the need to "make themselves known" and to "make their mark" on the unit in the short time they have to be noticed.

Another way to look at this process is to think of it in terms of any of the various group development theories put forth by social psychologists and management experts. These theories basically state that as groups (units) of personnel train and work together, they become closer in their interpersonal relationships. This leads to better confidence in and more dependence on each other. When members of the group change, especially key members (commanders/leaders), this confidence and dependency level drops for a period of time. The length of that time depends on how long it takes the group to rebuild and to regain that previously held level. Though this process also occurs (to some extent) as a result of routine personnel turnover, I think it is especially true and critical at the

change of commanders because of the commander's key and visible role in directing the unit's growth. The Battalion Commander has the responsibility to motivate all members of the unit. However, because of the nature of the chain of command, he directly motivates some and indirectly (through junior officers and non-commissioned officers) motivates others.

I call the other side of the stability coin the long side. It relates to the relationship between the time an officer remains in command and the overall effectiveness of the unit. Again, though difficult to measure, I think this relationship begins to change after a certain point. I think of it as being analogous to the economic principle of the law of diminishing returns. In other words, unit stability improves with time, but eventually gets to a point where it levels off and may even begin to decline. Obviously the point at which this leveling off or declining occurs will vary with time and unit. However, if it were identified and plotted for a series of individual commanders and units, I think it would show an average time frame--an average point at which it seemed to happen in the compared battalions. Strictly from a time and stability perspective, this average point in time would be the optimum command tour length. What is this "optimum" length of time? While I have no hard, scientific data to support my position, the results of my query of former battalion commanders supports my theory that the answer would be around twenty-four months.<sup>11</sup>

How do recent commanders feel about the unit stability issue? I asked former battalion commanders who are now students

in the United States Army War College (USAWC) class of 1990 for their opinions concerning the optimum command tour length. Thirty-eight percent of those responding specifically addressed the issue of unit stability in their answer. Here are some of the comments received.

- "Depends on what the Army is really trying to do with command tours. If we're genuinely interested in improving unit stability, cohesion, morale, and overall combat effectiveness, longer command tours at every level should be a primary objective."

- "This [current policy] also gives soldiers and junior officers a relatively long period of stability. Shorter tours would frequently result in (some) commanders trying to achieve too much, too quickly to make a name for themselves--the soldiers pay this bill."

- "... a shorter length of time causes the knee jerk syndrome."

- "Less than 24 months is really not satisfactory for the unit--too much change and jerking around with new policies, etc."

- "More frequent rotations would play havoc with unit and soldiers. May have impact on unit readiness."

- "The drawback to reducing the command tour is the turbulence it causes the soldiers."

- "Anything less [than 24 months] would be harmful, turbulent, and personally unsettling to the soldiers."

- "... also consider that a unit goes thru tremendous ups and downs prior to and after a change of command."

There is a side issue to the entire stability issue--the development of junior officers working for the commander. As a battalion commander, I took the approach that part of my job was to train my junior officers, especially company commanders, to be battalion commanders. Like other tasks, this is best done when the group serves together for an extended period. In most cases

this only happens with luck. A commander takes command and gets (or brings with him) several new company commanders and staff officers. Then, if he is lucky, the "team" stays together for all or most of his tour as commander. This is more the exception than the rule, however. It appears nothing has really changed since 1982 when Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Kitchings, USAWC class of 1982, surveyed his class members on the matter. On the specific issue of extended command tours contributing to the development of qualified commanders, he noted the following results. His report reads, "A large percentage of respondents do not see extended command tours contributing to developing qualified commanders. While battalion commanders are on station longer, their subordinate officers are not similarly stabilized to benefit fully from the battalion commander as a role model."<sup>12</sup>

Other measurements of unit stability could be discussed here, but I think my point is made. Any measurement of unit effectiveness will probably show a drop in the unit's performance at the time of a change in commanders. I equate this to instability in the unit, but I believe it is a temporary phenomena. Performance improves as the new commander and the members of the unit "rebuild" the team. As team members depart and as other factors impact on the unit, slight fluctuations will occur. Performance then levels off and, depending on the individual commander's style and personality, the unit may become stagnant and performance may even begin to decline. Related issues and probable contributing factors are discussed later.



The second primary consideration I believe prompted the CSA decision for a twenty-four month tour is the issue of the opportunity to command. To me this means the chance to gain the experience of commanding. Obviously, there are more Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels eligible to command than there are units to command. The senior leadership wants to provide the opportunity to command to as many as possible of our best qualified officers.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps a better way to state this goal is to say that they want to provide the experience of command to as many as possible of the best of the eligible officers. This may sound like an admirable goal, but reaching it means negotiating many variables. The approaches to the goal also vary greatly. Some take a purely mathematical view. For example, if we want more officers to command, why not just go back to shorter command tours? Simple arithmetic can prove that shorter tours will provide more officers the opportunity to command. If the number of commands remains relatively constant, command tours of twelve months will allow twice as many officers the opportunity to command as twenty-four month tours will allow. By the same analysis, longer tour length will allow fewer the chance to experience command. Figure 3 shows the impact of different command tour lengths on the numbers of commands available each year. The chart is an update of a DCSPER briefing slide using FY90 Command Designated Position List (CDPL) figures as a basis. The number of commands does play a key role, but it is only one of the variables. There are others that are just as important, if not more so.

The first of these other variables is the number of officers eligible for command selection. Eligible in this case is defined as meeting the following general prerequisites (LTC level command):

- a. Must be a Lieutenant Colonel or Major (P).
- b. Must not have
  - been selected as a principal by a prior LTC command selection board.
  - declined consideration prior to the convening of the selection board.
  - declined command after a previous selection.
  - been relieved of command.
  - completed 21 years of active federal commissioned service (AFCS) as of 1 Oct following the board's adjournment.

The number of officers meeting these eligibility criteria has not been relatively constant over the years. Figure 4 shows the number of eligible Lieutenant Colonels considered by the battalion level command selection boards for FY85 through FY90. FY85 was the first command selection board convened under the twenty-four month tour policy. It is important to remember several facts when reviewing Figure 4 and thinking of eligibility. The officer promoted "on time"--that is having no below the zone promotions--is generally considered eligible for five years. The exception to this is if the officer fails to meet one of the other eligibility criteria listed above after he has been previously considered. For example, one criteria of

eligibility for Lieutenant Colonels is that the officer will not exceed twenty-one years active federal commissioned service (AFCS) on 1 October following the adjournment of the selection board. Under this rule, some officers may be eligible fewer times. Also, an officer selected for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel below the zone will, in effect, be eligible a year earlier than the rest of his year group and, theoretically, would be considered eligible for command selection for up to six years. Also, a Captain who is selected for promotion to Major below the zone and selected for Lieutenant Colonel below the zone will be seen as having yet an additional year of eligibility. However, though it is not "automatic", those officers selected below the zone for promotion will probably be selected for command by the next command selection board that convenes (much more the case at the Lieutenant Colonel level than at the Colonel level). Officers in this category will, therefore, only receive one "look." Again, if they were not selected for command they would fall into the "eligible" category for (up to) the next six to seven years. U.S. Army PERSCOM uses the slide shown in Figure 5 to show these eligibility windows.

Another variable in the opportunity to command equation is the number of commands on the CDPL available during the selection year. Figure 6 shows the numbers of Lieutenant Colonel level commands approved by HQDA and the number of those commands available for FY85 thru FY90. Comparing the number available to the total number of commands each year shows that, on the average, 50 percent of the total commands turn over each FY. As

I will discuss in more detail later, this makes the twenty-four month tour attractive from the management standpoint. In fact, the twenty-four month command tour has apparently driven this 50 percent phenomena. As an additional item of interest, note that Figure 6 also shows that the number of Lieutenant Colonel commands has increased almost 10 percent since FY85. Prior to recently announced reductions, PERSCOM estimated the total of authorized command positions for FY91 to be 1025.

HQDA does attempt to quantify the command opportunity issue. Personnel management officials compute and monitor command opportunity expressed as a percentage--the chances (probability) of being selected to command. Because of the different numbers of commands available and the different quantities of eligible officers in the combat arms, combat support, and combat service support categories, PERSCOM, in some cases, even tracks this subject by branch. In doing so, however, officer management personnel consider many other variables in computing estimates of the probability of command opportunity. Some of these factors are evident, such as the difference that may occur in the number of officers eligible because of the differences in sizes of year groups. Others are subtle things the weight of which only the individual selection board member knows. Some examples of the latter are, certain unique items found in the considered officer's file, the Military and Civilian Education Levels (MEL/CEL), and the number of previous times the officer has been considered for command. The last item relates to the common

perception that an officer's chances of selection for command decline with each time he is considered and not chosen.

Perhaps this is a good time to introduce the terms "de facto eligibility" and "de facto qualification." I use these terms to describe the gray area between "eligible" and "qualified."

I mentioned the perception existing in the field that an officer's chances of selection decrease with each year he is considered and not selected. When announcing command selection boards and their results, HQDA uses gross numbers to describe the eligible population. For example, Figure 4 shows that 5 Lieutenant Colonels were considered eligible for command selection by the FY90 board. As I stated previously, some of this number would already have been considered by previous boards. When looked at a second or third time, are they truly as "eligible" as they were the first time they were considered? Thinking in terms of pure eligibility criteria, I believe the answer is, "yes." However, going beyond the eligibility issue and thinking in terms of being "best qualified", I believe the answer is, "no" and I believe this is also the perception of the majority of the officers in the field. For example, if they were not among the best last year, what puts them among the best this year?

The other question, or another way to ask the same thing, is, "are they really qualified?" What qualifies a Lieutenant Colonel to command a battalion? It is known that the board considers the officer's overall performance in all jobs. What about the value of some jobs vis-a-vis others? What are the

chances that a Lieutenant Colonel who never commanded a company will be selected to command at the battalion level? I will not say that it never happens, but I believe it is a factor in the qualification equation. I only use this as an example of one of the "discriminators" used to apply de facto qualification.

PERSCOM officials include those elements and conditions that are quantifiable (to which a weight or value is assigned) in a model which calculates the chance of being selected to command. Figure 7 shows an example of how PERSCOM computations vary by branch. Incidentally, this is the Army average today. The slide is part of a briefing recently given to a USAWC Advanced Course class by a PERSCOM representative.

Although many variables enter into the equation, longer command tours do play more than just a mathematical role in decreasing opportunities. Whether it is a major or minor role depends on the total number of commands, the number of officers being considered, the officer's window of eligibility, qualifications, and the "de facto eligibility" and "de facto qualification" issues I have mentioned.

Most of the officers with whom I discussed the opportunity to command issue were much more concerned with it from a mathematical standpoint than from a qualification or de facto qualification approach. They looked at shorter command tours as giving more (in numbers of) officers the opportunity to command. This can be shown by the purely mathematical analysis I discussed earlier. Increasing tours from twenty-four months to thirty months reduces opportunity to command by 20 percent while going

to a thirty-six month tour reduces it by 33 percent. One respondent expressed his theory on the mathematical impact by saying, "In the Infantry, there are 150 plus battalion commands. To extend each command[er] by one month [equals] 150 months of command time consumed thereby denying [six] others battalion command."

As a final note on the opportunity to command issue, how do recent commanders feel about it as a consideration in setting command tour length? Forty percent of those responding about command tour length included specific references to providing qualified, eligible officers the opportunity to experience command. Here are some of their comments.

- "Extended command tours would decrease the opportunity for all or most to command at as many levels as possible."

- "The 30/36 month command tour deprived too many promising leaders of the requisite command opportunity."

- "Any longer tours will detriment command opportunities--adverse impact on the Army."

- "Longer tours greatly reduce command opportunity and consequently the pool of trained, competent leaders for senior Army positions."

- "Longer tours would deny command opportunity to too many deserving officers."

- "... the limited number of commands coupled with the beneficial experience of command convinces me that the best trade off comes with the [current policy]."

- "Longer tours reduce command opportunity and fewer officers gain command experience."

#### **Additional Considerations**

In providing their comments about the optimum tour length, 27 percent of those responding specifically mentioned "burnout"

or some related term. Some used such words as "tired" or "stress." Others specifically discussed the toll the command tour takes on the spouse and family.

Studies and their results are plentiful in this area. The problem I encountered in my research is there is little data available that I can correlate directly to military duties. However, all of us have felt the effects of something we referred to as burnout at one time or another. As Christina Maslach points out, "There is no single definition of burnout that is accepted as a standard." She offers some twenty or so widely used definitions. I think two of those describe what a commander may begin to feel after some number of months in command. The first is, "A state of exhaustion, irritability, and fatigue that markedly decreases the worker's effectiveness and capability." Another one (which I prefer) says, "A condition produced by working too long in a high pressure environment."<sup>14</sup>

I do not mean to imply that every commander experiences this condition at the same specific point in his command tour. However, I do believe we all feel it at some time. The specific time and the intensity of the feeling depends on the commander and the environment.

A second point I would like to make here is that I do not think it is automatically time to turn over your command just because you feel the onset of this condition. There are things one can do about it; take some annual leave, for one. Again, I do feel there comes a time during the command tour when the commander begins to feel that he has begun reinventing the wheel



or solving the same problem for the third or fourth time. He starts to feel burnout more often and finds less relief in the method he chooses to repair himself.

My interpretation of the comments of those respondents who surfaced this condition is that most feel that somewhere around the twenty-fourth month seems to be the culminating point at which stress levels begin to degrade personal capabilities. Several former commanders responding to my question made it a point to say that the same condition also took its toll on family members. Additionally, they said things seemed to intensify as they neared the twenty-four month point in their command tour. It is also only fair to mention that one officer specifically stated that he thought burnout was "BS."

Again, the feelings of stress, fatigue, and loss of effectiveness are difficult to correlate to a specific length of time in command. Twenty-four month command tours have been the policy since the FY85 command selection board. Perhaps some commanders would not begin to think about or feel burnout until the thirty-sixth month, if command tours were for that length of time. A former brigade commander offered the following explanation:

"There may be a self-imposed factor here. If tour lengths were longer, commanders would (from the start) have to pace themselves for the long haul. [The] result (at all levels) might be less of a high pressure environment."<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of what one calls it--stress, fatigue, burnout, or even boredom--I believe there comes a time in the command tour when the commander's effectiveness begins to level off or even

decline. I know some commanders will never admit it, but it happens. At that point he needs to move on. It is at this time when the unit needs some "new blood" and the commander needs a "fresh start." The results of my research show that those commanders who do admit to experiencing burnout, believe that it happens at the approach to the twenty-fourth month in command.

Another consideration mentioned by recent commanders is the aspect of capturing the knowledge and experience of former battalion commanders for use in other key positions. Some senior commanders have assignment policies that try to capture this experience by informally earmarking key jobs in their brigade or division for former battalion commanders. The Army does not document the expertise gained by former battalion commanders as we do other qualifications. Nonetheless, senior leaders want that experience in their organizations.

The demand for former battalion commanders has and will continue to exceed the supply. The senior leadership of the Army sets the priorities for assignment of these officers. The problem is that a very small window of availability for assignment exists for former battalion commanders. Many factors influence the shortage--overseas tour length, stabilization, late command selection, promotion, and school selection, to name a few. Some individuals will miss the window completely.<sup>16</sup> For example, the normal tour in Europe is three years. If command tours are thirty months or thirty-six months, command could be the only job a Lieutenant Colonel has while on a normal tour in this important theater. Agreeably, if offered a "good" (career

enhancing) job following command, many officers will extend their tour to take it. Senior leaders in long tour areas quite naturally want to capitalize on the skills of these former commanders. Longer command tours make it difficult to do so.

Another fact is that the Army selects many former commanders for Senior Service College attendance. School selection boards usually pick them within a year or so after leaving command. It is easy to see how shorter command tours may alleviate this situation, but at what price? Is it worth the possible decrease in unit stability?

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Respondents who had worked in the officer management and assignment arena surfaced the need for a manageable system. Again, many factors come into play here. I think the thrust of the management issue lies primarily in two areas--costs associated with Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves and the individual officer's search for some stability of his own.

Shorter command tours will lead to increased PCS moves. Take twelve month tours as an example. With a twelve month command tour, the management of all officers coming out of and going into command annually would be extremely difficult. Even if it is theoretically possible, it may not be affordable. We simply do not have the money to increase PCS moves for a thousand officers a year unless it could be clearly shown that the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Also, at the grade of Lieutenant Colonel, most officers begin to grow more aware of family concerns. Many reflect on the earlier years and feel guilty for "neglecting" the family while

in important, demanding assignments. Others see teenagers needing stability in high school or in beginning college. Parents and in-laws are older. The tendency is to want to stay closer to them. Still others see a spouse's career beginning to get more important. All of these reasons and others may make the officer feel that moving for a one year command with a high probability of moving again immediately afterwards may not be worth it. The officer may choose this point in his career to emphasize the family unit. However, I think the officer is likely to accept a move for the two year tour--especially for a command.

Longer command tours, therefore, mean fewer moves, are easier to manage (from a PCS standpoint), and cost less in overall PCS dollars. From a management perspective, however, there is another aspect of the longer tour. Command tours in other than yearly increments tend to complicate management. Eighteen month and thirty month tours cause many officers to move during the winter. This means pulling children from school in the middle of the year and coping with the foul weather season while traveling and settling in. Again, not something many Lieutenant Colonels want to do.

A final consideration, and perhaps the most important, is the time seen necessary (by the individual commander) for a commander to make an impact on the unit. Fifty-four percent of the former commanders I questioned on the optimum tour length provided comments in this area. All of them supported the position that less than twenty-four months does not allow the

commander the time necessary to make effective changes in a unit. The common theme expressed in the comments is that a commander needs enough time to do long range planning in all major areas and time to see the outcome of that planning. Some of the specific comments follow.

- "A commander should at least see some of the results of his long term planning."

- "[Twenty-four months] affords adequate time to get one's feet on the ground, programs and projects started, completed, etc."

- "[2 years] gives you enough time to put your imprint on the unit and make it a better one than the one you were given."

- "[Present policy] keeps you in command long enough to be responsible for your own planning...."

- "12-18 months is simply too short to be able to address shortcomings, initiate programs, guide implementation, make corrections, and institutionalize the whole process or program."

- "Less than 24 months is clearly too short for a commander to make a true, deep assessment of his unit, implement changes, and most importantly, see the effects of those changes and respond to the new situation."

#### Summary

The optimum command tour length is that which provides the best results when considering all of the following conditions:

1. **Increases unit stability**--minimizes turbulence on unit processes and individual soldiers.

2. **Optimizes command opportunity**--provides the chance for professional growth gained through the command experience to the largest possible number of qualified officers consistent with other conditions.

3. Minimizes commander stress and burnout--supports the theory that commander effectiveness reaches a point of diminishing return and that this point should be the upper limit of the command tour length.

4. Provides a tour length that is manageable--supports current HQDA officer personnel assignment policies and guidance and the budget authorized for their implementation.

5. Sets a command tour length long enough to allow commanders the opportunity to make maximum contribution to the unit and the Army. The length should be sufficient to let the commander accomplish long range (maybe only one year in the context of a two year command tour) planning and to experience the results of that planning.

Records indicate that the policies on command tour length in the past have established the length in six month increments--six, twelve, eighteen, twenty-four, and thirty months. Unofficial data and informal discussions with current and previous personnel management officials support the theory that those tour lengths in increments of one year--twelve months, twenty-four months, and thirty-six months--would better facilitate the management of officers from transfer and assignment viewpoints.

Of those former commanders in the USAWC class of 1990 providing input to this analysis, 86 percent feel that the twenty-four month tour is the optimum or "best compromise." Eight percent feel that longer than twenty-four months is better. Only

5 percent supported less than twenty-four months. One percent advocated a variable length tour tied to training cycles, National Training Center rotation, and commander accomplishments.

### Conclusions

I believe the twenty-four month command tour, current HQDA policy, is the optimum tour length. I see it as the length that provides the best possible result in considering all the conditions established and discussed above. It provides substantial unit stability over shorter tours and is long enough to allow a commander to establish goals and objectives and see the results of his efforts. It strikes a compromise between making an adequate number of commands available each year for the command experience and allowing for the selection of those officers felt to be the best qualified to command without any, so far, widespread outcries that we are not capturing all of the best or that we are "dipping too low" and selecting the not so qualified officers. Twenty-four months appears to be the length of time at which stress and burnout peak in the command environment. It is a manageable length in that it accommodates and supports current officer personnel assignment policies and guidance. The fact that the Army institutionalized the management of the twenty-four month command tour in FY85 and has moved, deliberately or not, toward turning over half of those commands each year supports this last point.

### Recommendations

I recommend the current HQDA policy on command tour length for Lieutenant Colonel level commands as stated in AR 600-20 and

as shown in Figure 1 of this paper remain in effect. I base my recommendation on the current force structure as it relates to the number of commands in this category and the number of officers eligible for consideration by command selection boards. I do not feel that the policy will need review in the near future unless the Army implements force structure reductions without making concurrent and proportional reductions in the number of officers eligible for command at this level. Should force structure changes result in a drastic reduction in the number of Lieutenant Colonel commands while the number of officers eligible for command of those units remains at today's levels, a review of command tour length policy will become mandatory. However, if that is necessary, I recommend that every effort be made to maintain command tour length at twenty-four months. I believe this is the tour length best for the Army. If the Army of the future is to be smaller and lighter, yet more effective and more efficient, we must continue to attract and retain the best officers. We must adjust the promotion and school selection subsystems to recognize those officers who make invaluable contributions to the Army but do not get the chance to command because of the twenty-four month policy. Otherwise, we are likely to end up with many stable and effective, but individual, units with no deployable, sustainable, or formidable fighting capability because the best of the "non-commander" writers of doctrine and policy have chosen another career.



## CURRENT FIELD GRADE COMMAND TOUR POLICY

"For field grade, a minimum of 24 months. In overseas areas where the tour length precludes such tenure of command, the command tour will coincide with the overseas tour. Commanders (MG or above) may extend command tours up to 6 months. Requests for exceptions to this policy will be submitted through MACOM...."

SOURCE: Army Regulation 600-20, paragraph 2-3d(2)

Figure 1

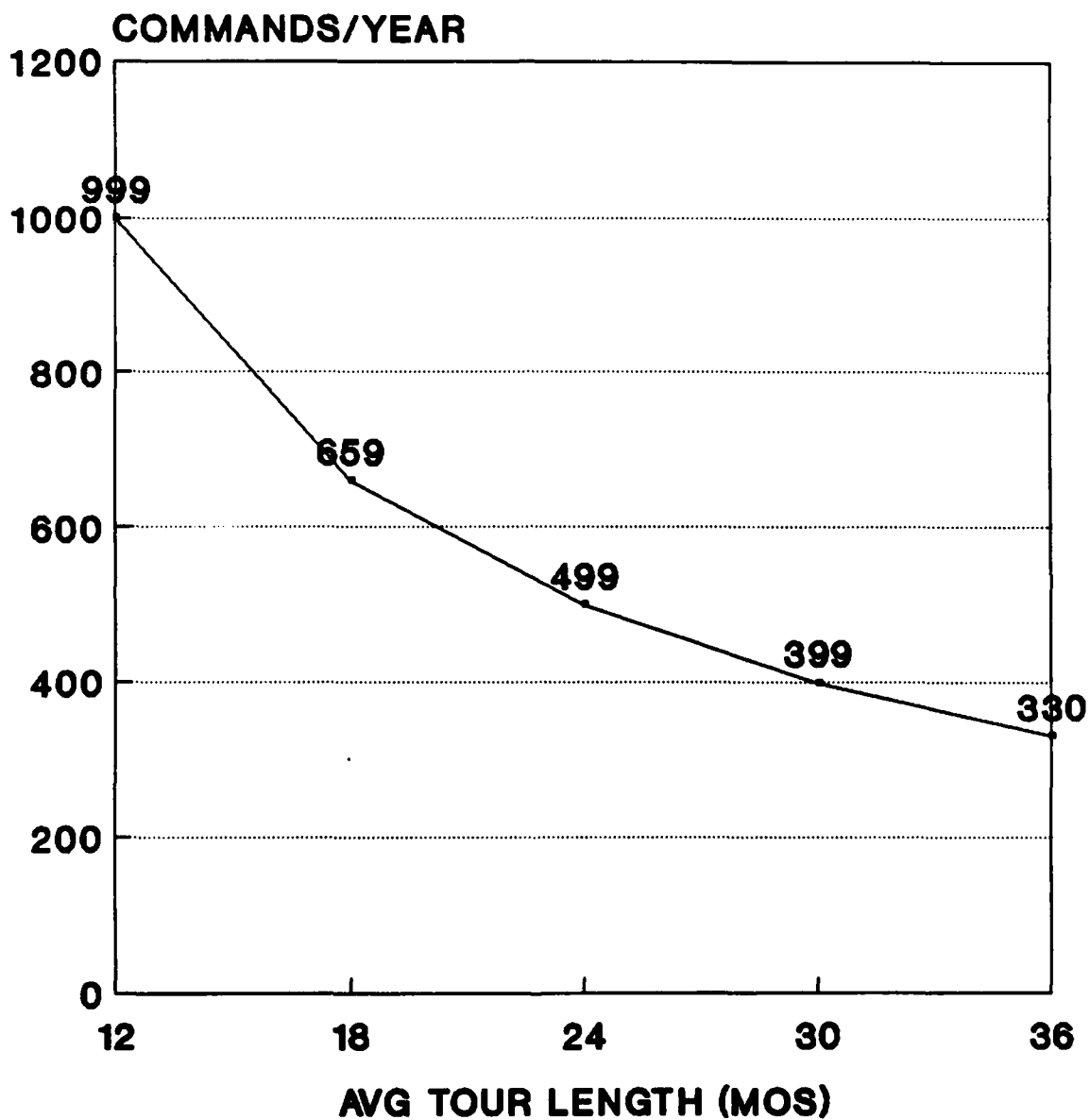
CONCLUSIONS OF HQDA ANALYSIS OF COMMAND TOUR  
LENGTH IMPACTS ON PROMOTION AND SCHOOL SELECTION

- 36 MONTH COMMAND TOUR LENGTH WILL INCREASE THE NUMBER OF NON-COMMANDERS SELECTED FOR PROMOTION--(BUT SUBJECTIVELY THEY WILL MOST LIKELY BE THE SAME OFFICERS WHO WOULD BE COMMANDERS WITH A SHORTER TOUR LENGTH).
- COMMAND TOUR LENGTH WILL PROBABLY HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON SSC SELECTION FOR NON-COMMANDERS.
- THERE WILL BE RELATIVELY LITTLE CHANGE IN THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SELECTION FOR PROMOTION FOR THE MAJORITY OF NON-COMMANDERS (54% PROBABILITY THAT AN OFFICER WILL NOT COMMAND OR BE SELECTED FOR COLONEL).
- A 36 MONTH COMMAND TOUR POLICY CREATES A SMALLER "ELITE" GROUP WITHIN THE OFFICER CORPS.
- INCREASED TOUR LENGTH DOES NOT MAKE OPMS WORK BETTER BY PROVIDING SUFFICIENTLY INCREASED OPPORTUNITY FOR PROMOTION AND SCHOOL.
- 24 MONTH COMMAND TOUR BETTER MEETS OFFICER EXPECTATIONS OF COMMAND THAN A 36 MONTH TOUR.
- 36 MONTH COMMAND TOUR LENGTH DOES NOT PROVIDE THE INCREASED PROMOTION AND SCHOOL OPPORTUNITY EXPECTED AS A RESULT OF THE DECREASED POOL OF COMMANDERS.
- THE COMMAND TOUR LENGTH DECISION SHOULD BE BASED ON FACTORS OTHER THAN AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE OPMS WORK, E.G. PROVIDE NON-COMMANDERS INCREASED OPPORTUNITY FOR PROMOTION AND SCHOOL SELECTION.
- OTHER ALTERNATIVES BETTER ADDRESS THE OPMS EXPECTATIONS FOR SSC AND PROMOTION SELECTION THAN DO THE INCREASED COMMAND TOUR LENGTH[S].

SOURCE: Department of the Army Briefing Files (1983)

Figure 2

# IMPACT OF TOUR LGTH ON CMD AVAILABILITY Lieutenant Colonel Aggregate

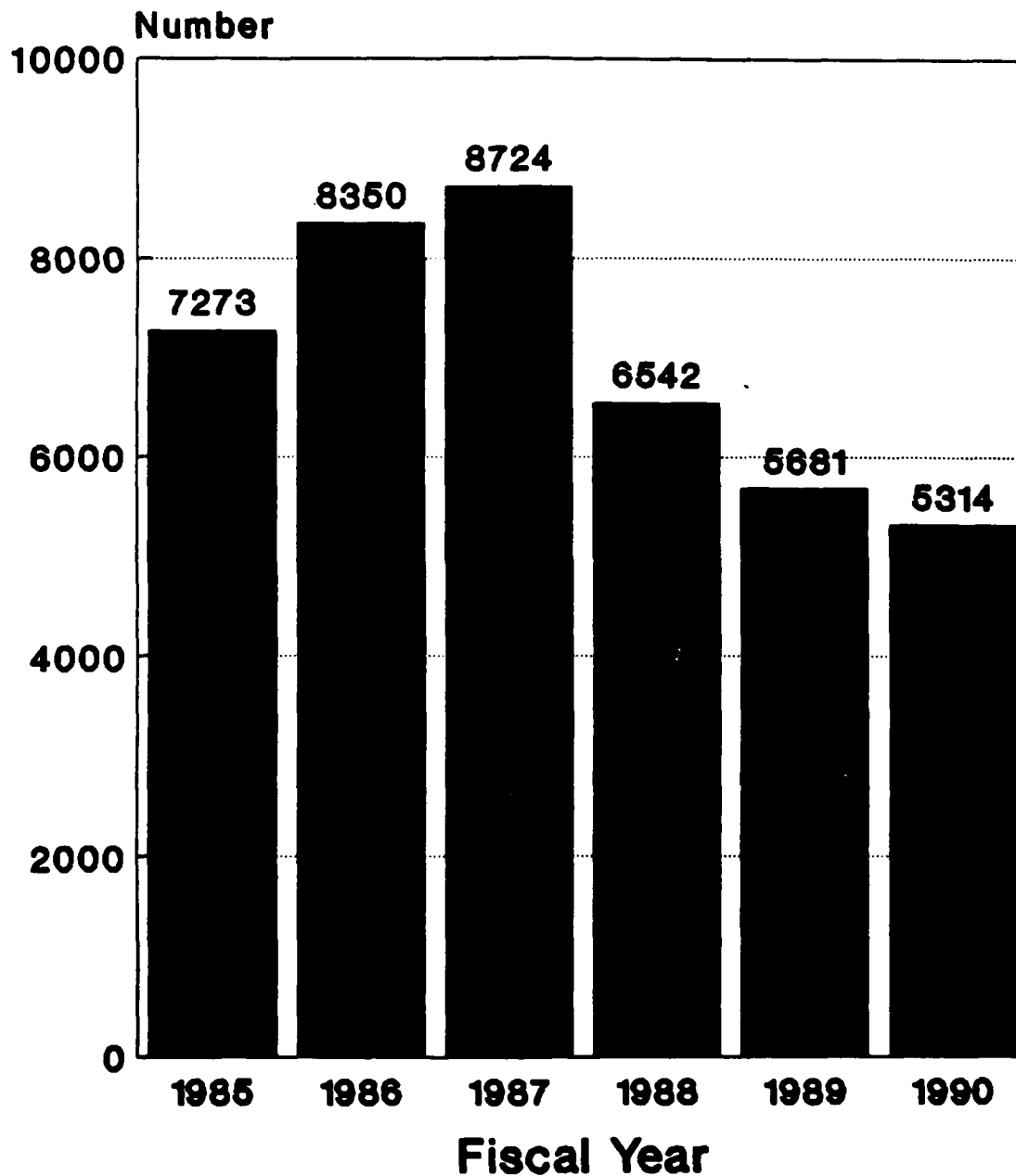


—•— Commands Per Year

Figure 3

Data Source: U.S. Army PERSCOM

## LTCs ELIGIBLE FY85-FY90



Data Source: U.S. Army PERSCOM

Figure 4

# CURRENT BATTALION COMMAND POLICY

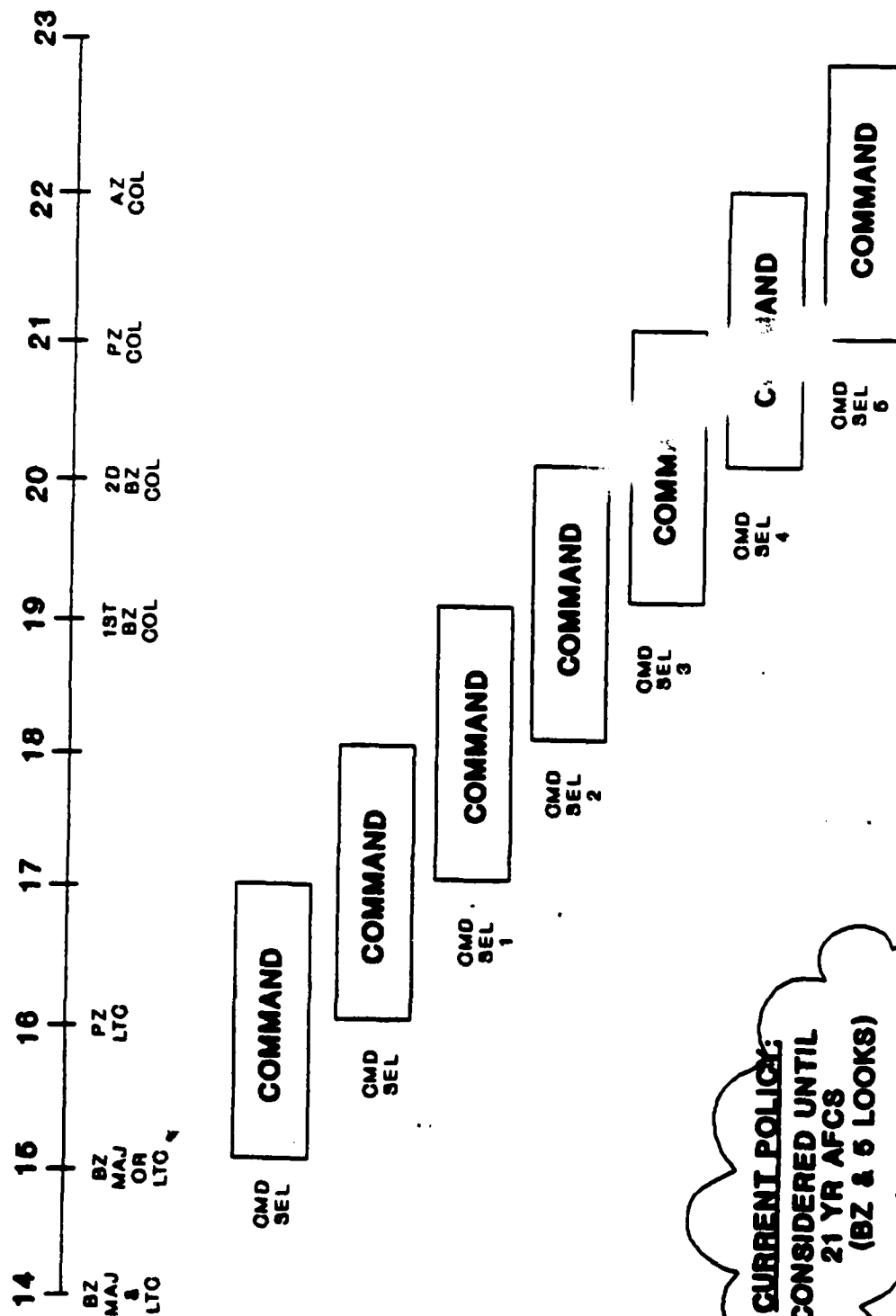
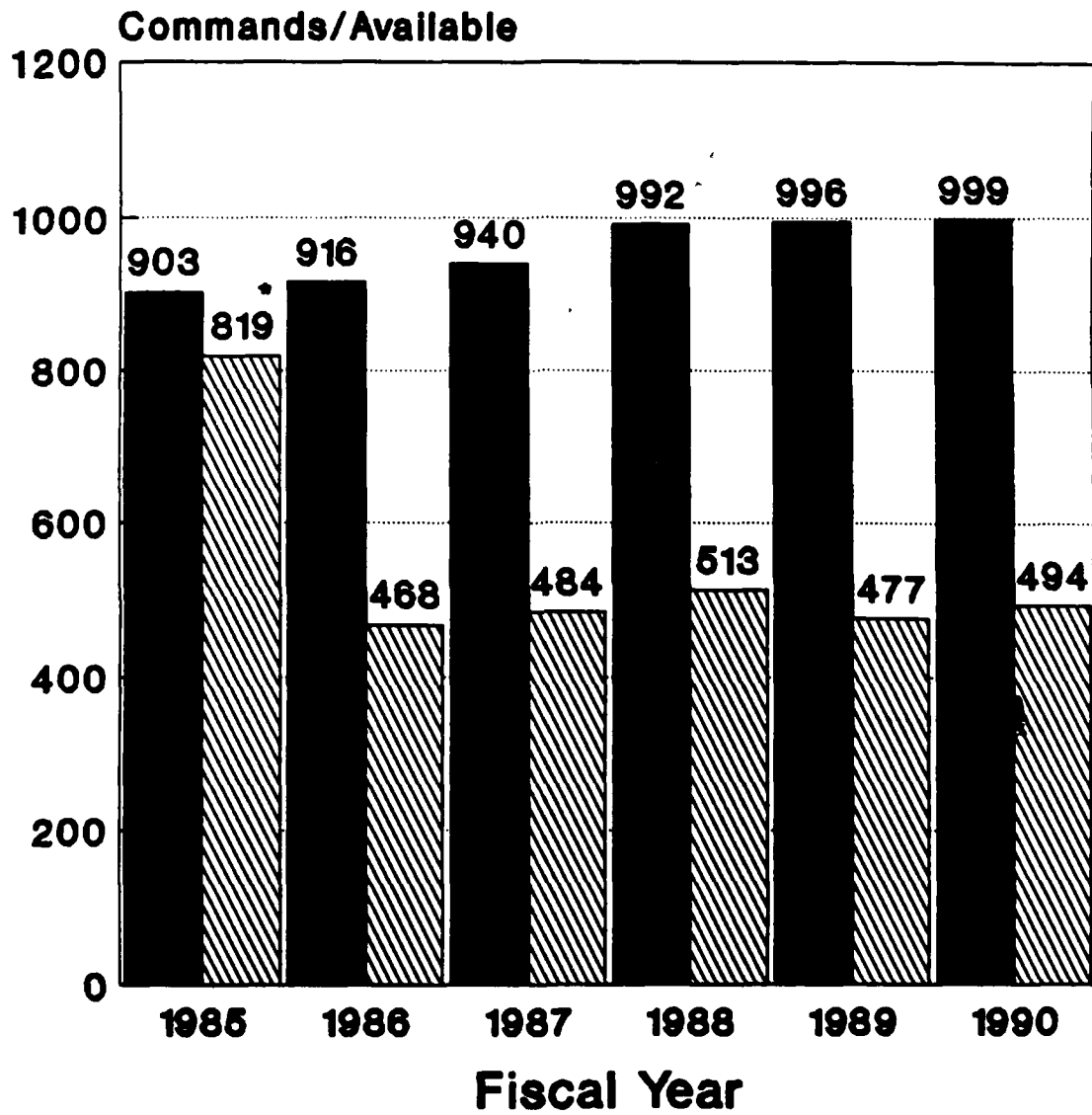


Figure 5

SOURCE: OPMD, U.S. Army PERSCOM (1990)

# LTC COMMAND AVAILABILITY FY85-FY90



■ Total Commands    ▨ Commands Available

Figure 6

• See Endnote #17

Data Source: U.S. Army PERSCOM

# BATTALION COMMAND OPPORTUNITY

<u>BR</u>	<u>RATE</u>
11	34%
12	43%
13	37%
14	36%
15	17%
18	22%
21	35%
25	35%
31	27%
35	24%
42	12%
44	33%
74	29%
88	55%
91	65%
92	36%
<b>AVE</b>	<b>32%</b>

## AVAILABLE COMMANDS

COMBAT ARMS	557
COMBAT SPT ARMS	183
COMBAT SVC SPT	260
<b>TOTAL CMDS</b>	<b>1000</b>

Figure 7

SOURCE: U.S. Army PERSCOM, OPMD (1990)

## ENDNOTES

1. Although the command tour length policy established in 1980 provided for a thirty month command tour, it was not unusual to exceed that. Many commanders served for thirty-six months in command during this time frame.

2. Since the DCSPER memorandum included recommendations for changing the command tour length policy, DCSPER used the Action Memorandum to provide information and recommendations and to record the decision of the CSA.

3. U.S. Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, D.C., Memorandum, Subject: Command Tour Lengths--ACTION MEMORANDUM, 14 July 1983, p.1.

4. Ibid., p.1.

5. U.S. Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Briefing Slides, Washington: Undated, Chart 1, "Purpose."

6. Without knowledge of the specific conversations that accompanied this briefing to the CSA, I can only offer my interpretation of the meaning of this particular conclusion. I believe the attempt was being made here to remind senior leaders that if there were issues with the promotion and school selection subsystems of OPMS, they needed to be reviewed directly. In other words, the Army should not attempt to fix promotion and school selection problems by adjusting the command tour length. Further, I do not think this was the CSA's approach. It may have been perceived as such, however, by some action officer(s).

7. "Officer Career Notes", The Army Communicator, Volume 8, Number 4 (Fall 1983), p.59.

8. No additional records of briefings, conversations, or memorandum were found. The CSA decision is recorded on the DCSPER Action Memorandum itself. It includes handwritten approval and guidance for public affairs releases and for the next command selection board.

9. DCSPER Memorandum, p.2.

10. Headquarters, Department of the Army, A Review of Education and Training for Officers, Washington: 30 June 1978, vol. 4, p. R-2-4.

11. My query consisted of one question (intentionally open-ended) inviting comment on command tour length. The question was, "In your opinion, what should be the length of Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel command tours?" "Why?" An extract of Army Regulation 600-20 stating current Army policy was also provided.



The question was sent to 153 former commanders. One hundred and four responded for a response rate of sixty-eight percent.

12. Phillip Kitchings, Jr., LTC, To Determine the Impact of OPMS on the Development of Commanders. Student Essay Study Project. Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, April 1982. p. 16.

13. In this paper, eligible officers are those meeting the criteria outlined in Army Regulation 600-20. It is the duty of the Centralized Command Selection Board to select the best qualified officers from this group.

14. Paine, Whiton Stewart, ed. Job Stress and Burnout: Research, Theory, and Intervention Perspectives, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982. p. 30: "Understanding Burnout: Definitional Issues in Analyzing a Complex Phenomenon," by Christina Maslach.

15. Interview with Colonel Richard H. Goldsmith, Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA., 1 March 1990.

16. Headquarters, Department of the Army, OPMD Orientation and Counseling Guide, Washington: October 1986. p. 101.

17. The Command Selection Board for FY85 was the first board to which the twenty-four month tour rule applied. Recall that the previous policy had required thirty months of command time. The "bubble" in the number of commands available for that Fiscal Year is a result of the "normal" command turnover plus a number of command tours that would have been thirty months being curtailed at twenty-four months.